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XXVII

FEDERAL officers, searching the hills, found the camp above Jackknife Cañon. They collected a number of empty bottles bearing labels identical with those on the bottles in the cases carried by the burros, and those found in Custer Pennington's room. That was all they discovered, except that the camp was located on the Pennington property.

The district attorney, realizing the paucity of evidence calculated to convict the prisoner on any serious charge, was inclined to drop the prosecution; but the prohibition enforcement agents, backed by a band of women, most of whom had never performed a woman's first duty to the state and society, and therefore had ample time to meddle in affairs far beyond the scope of their intellects, seized upon the prominence of the Pennington name to gain notoriety for themselves on the score that the conviction of a member of a prominent family would have an excellent moral effect upon the community at large.

Just how they arrived at this conclusion it is difficult to discern. Similarly one might argue that if it could be proved that the Pope was a pickpocket, it would be tremendously effective in regenerating the morals of the world.

Be that as it may, the works of the righteous were not without fruit, for on the 12th of October Custer Pennington was found guilty and sentenced to six months in the county jail for having had several hundred dollars' worth of stolen whiskey in his possession. He was neither surprised nor disheartened. His only concern was for the sensibilities of his family, and these—represented at the trial in the person of his father—seemed far from overwhelmed, for the colonel was unalterably convinced of his son's innocence.

Eva, who had remained at home with her mother, was more deeply affected than the others, though through a sense of injustice rather than of shame. Shannon, depressed by an unwarranted sense of responsibility for the wrong that Custer had suffered, and chagrined that force of circumstances should have prevented her from saving the Penningtons from a stain upon their escutcheon, found it increasingly difficult to continue her intimacy with these loved friends. Carrying in her heart the knowledge and the proof of his innocence, she regarded herself as a traitor among them, and in consequence held herself more and more aloof from their society, first upon one pretext and then upon another.

At a loss to account for her change toward them, Eva, in a moment of depression, attributed it to the disgrace of Custer's imprisonment.

"She is ashamed to associate with the family of a—a—jailbird!" she cried.

"I don't believe anything of the kind," replied the colonel. "Shannon's got too much sense, and she's too loyal. That's all damned poppycock!"

"I'm sure she couldn't feel that way," said Mrs. Pennington. "She has been just as positive in her assertions of Custer's innocence as any of us."

"You might as well think the same about Guy," said the colonel. "He's scarcely been up here since Custer's arrest."

"He's very busy on a new story. Anyway, I asked him about that very thing, and offered to break the engagement if he

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felt our disgrace too keenly to want to marry into the family."

The colonel drew her down to his knee.

"You silly little girl!" he said. "Do you suppose that this has made any difference in the affection that Guy or any other of our real friends feel for us? Not in the slightest. Even if Cus were guilty, they would not change. Those who did we would be better off not to know. I am rather jealous of the Pennington honor myself, but I have never felt that this affair is any reflection upon it, and you need not."

"But I can't help it, popsy. My brother, my dear brother, in jail with a lot of thieves and murderers and horrible people like that! It is just too awful! I lie awake at night thinking about it. I am ashamed to go to the village, for fear some one will point at me and say, 'There goes the girl whose brother is in jail!'"

"You are taking it much too hard, dear," said her mother. "One would think that our boy was really guilty."

"Oh, if he really were, I should kill myself!"

The only person, other than the officious reformers, to derive any happiness from young Pennington's fate was Slick Allen. He occupied a cell not far from Custer's, and there were occasions when they were thrown together. Several times Allen saw fit to fling gibes at his former employer, much to the amusement of his fellows. They were usually indirect.

One day, as Custer was passing, Allen remarked in a loud tone:

"There's a lot more of these damn fox-trottin' dudes that put on airs, but ain't nothin' but common thieves!"

Pennington turned and faced him.

"You remember what you got the last time you tried calling me names, Allen? Well, don't think for a minute that just because we're in jail I won't hand you the same thing again some day, if you get too funny. The trouble with you, Allen, is that you are laboring under the misapprehension that you are a humorist. You're not, and if I were you I wouldn't make faces at the only man in this jail who knows about you, and Bartolo, and—Gracial. Don't forget Gracial!"

Allen paled, and his eyes closed to two very narrow slits. He made no more observations concerning Pennington; but he devoted much thought to him, trying to arrive at some reasonable explanation of the man's silence, when it was evident that he must have sufficient knowledge of the guilt of others to clear himself of the charge upon which he had been convicted.

To Allen's hatred of Custer was now added a real fear, for he had been present when Bartolo killed Gracial. The other two witnesses had been Mexicans, and Allen had no doubt but that if Bartolo were accused, the three of them would swear that the American committed the murder.

One of the first things to do, when he was released from jail, would be to do away with Bartolo. Bartolo disposed of, the other witnesses would join with Allen to lay the guilt upon the departed. Such pleasant thoughts occupied the time and mind of Slick Allen, as did also his plans for paying one Wilson Crumb a little debt he felt due this one-time friend.

Nor was Crumb free from apprehension for the time that would see Allen's jail sentence fulfilled. He well knew the nature of the man. It is typical of drug addicts to disregard the effect of their acts further than the immediate serving of their own interests, and the director had encompassed Allen's arrest merely to meet the emergency of the moment. Later, as time gave him the opportunity to consider what must inevitably follow Allen's release, he began to take thought as to means whereby he might escape the just deserts of his treachery.

He knew enough of Allen's activities to send the man to a Federal prison for a long term, but these matters he could not divulge without equally incriminating himself. There was, however, one little item of Allen's past which might be used against him without signal danger to Crumb, and that was the murder of Gracial. It would not be necessary for Crumb to appear in the matter at all. An anonymous letter to the police would suffice to direct suspicion of the crime toward Allen, and to insure for Crumb, if not permanent immunity, at least a period of reprieve.

With the natural predilection of the weak for avoiding or delaying the consummation of their intentions, Crumb postponed the writing of this letter of accusation. There was no cause for hurry, he argued, since Allen's time would not expire until the 6th of the following August.

Crumb led a lonely life after the departure of Gaza. His infatuation for the girl had as closely approximated love as a crea-

ture of his type could reach. He had come to depend upon her, and to look forward to finding her at the Vista del Paso bungalow on his return from the studio. Since her departure his evenings had been unbearable, and with the passing weeks he developed a hatred for the place that constantly reminded him of his loss. He had been so confident that she would have to return to him after she had consumed the small quantity of morphine he had allotted her that only after the weeks had run into months did he realize that she had probably gone out of his life forever. How she had accomplished it he could not understand, unless she had found means of obtaining the narcotic elsewhere.

Not knowing where she had gone, he had no means of searching for her. In his own mind, however, he was convinced that she must have returned to Los Angeles. Judging others by himself, he could conceive of no existence that would be supportable beyond the limits of a large city, where the means for the gratification of his vice might be obtained.

That Gaza de Lure had successfully thrown off the fetters into which he had tricked her never for a moment entered his calculations. Finally, however, it was borne in upon him that there was little likelihood of her returning; and so depressing had become the familiar and suggestive furnishings of the Vista del Paso bungalow that he at last gave it up, stored his furniture, and took a room at a local hotel. He took with him, carefully concealed in a trunk, his supply of narcotics—which he did not find it so easy to dispose of since the departure of his accomplice.

During the first picture in which Grace Evans had worked with him, Crumb had become more and more impressed with her beauty and the subtle charm of her refinement, which appealed to him by contrast with the ordinary surroundings and personalities of the K. K. S. studio. There was a quiet restfulness about her which soothed his diseased nerves, and after Gaza's desertion he found himself more and more seeking her society. As was his accustomed policy, his attentions were at first so slight, and increased by such barely perceptible degrees, that, taken in connection with his uniform courtesy, they gave the girl no warning of his ultimate purposes.

The matter of the test had shocked and disgusted her for the moment; but the thing having been done, and no harm coming from it, she began to consider even that with less revulsion than formerly. The purpose of it she had never been able to fathom; but if Crumb had intended it to place him insidiously upon a plane of greater intimacy with the girl, he had succeeded. That the effect was subjective rendered it none the less effective.

Added to these factors in the budding intimacy between the director and the extra girl was the factor which is always most potent in similar associations—the fear that the girl holds of offending a potent ally, and the hope of propitiating a power in which lies the potentiality of success upon the screen.

Lunches at Frank's, dinners at the Ship, dances at the Country Club, led by easy gradations to more protracted parties at the Sunset Inn and the Green Mill. The purposes of Crumb's shrewdly conceived and carefully executed plan were twofold. Primarily, he sought a companionship to replace that of which Gaza de Lure had robbed him. Secondarily, he needed a new tool to assist in the disposal of the considerable store of narcotics that he had succeeded in tricking Allen and his accomplices into delivering to him with the understanding that he would divide the profits of the sales with them—which, however, Crumb had no intention of doing if he could possibly avoid it.

In much the same manner that he had tricked Gaza de Lure, he tricked Grace Evans into the use of cocaine; and after that the rest was easy. Renting another and less pretentious bungalow on Circle Terrace, he installed the girl there, and transferred the trunk of narcotics to her care, retaining his room at the hotel for himself.

Grace's fall was more easily accomplished than in the case of Gaza, and was more complete, for the former had neither the courage nor the strength of character that had enabled the other to withstand the more degrading advances of her tempter. To assume that the girl made no effort to oppose his importunings would be both unfair and unjust, for both heredity and training had endowed her with a love of honor and a horror of the sordidness of vice; but the gradual undermining of her will by the subtle inroads of narcotics rendered her powerless to withstand the final assault upon the citadel of her scruples.

One evening, toward the middle of October, they were dining together at the Winter Garden. Crumb had bought an evening paper on the street, and was glancing through it as they sat waiting for their dinner to be served. Presently he looked up at the girl seated opposite him.

"Didn't you come from a little jerkwater place up the line, called Ganado?" he asked.

She nodded affirmatively.

"Why?"

"Here's a guy from there been sent up for bootlegging — fellow by the name of Pennington."

She half closed her eyes, as if in pain.

"I know," she said. "It has been in the newspapers for the last couple of weeks."

"Did you know him?"

"Yes—he has been out to see me since his arrest, and he called up once."

"Did you see him?"

"No—I would be ashamed to see any decent person!"

"Decent!" snorted Crumb. "You don't call a damned bootlegger decent, do you?"

"I don't believe he ever did it," said the girl. "I have known him all my life, and his family. I'm certain that he couldn't have done it."

A sudden light came into Crumb's eye.

"By God!" he exclaimed, bringing his fist down upon the table.

"What is the matter?" Grace inquired.

"Well, wouldn't that get you?" he exclaimed. "I never connected you at all!"

"What do you mean?"

"This fellow Pennington may not be guilty, but I know who is."

"How do you know? I don't understand you. Why do you look at me that way?"

"Well, if that isn't the best ever!" exclaimed the man. "And here you have been handing me a long line of talk about the decent family you came from, and how it would kill them if they knew you sniffed a little coke now and then. Well, wouldn't that get you? You certainly are a fine one to preach!"

"I don't understand you," said the girl. "What has this to do with me? I am not related to Mr. Pennington, but it would make no difference if I were, for I know he never did anything of the sort. The idea of a Pennington bootlegging! Why, they have more money than they need, and always have had."

"It isn't Pennington who ought to be in jail," he said. "It's your brother."

She looked at him in surprise, and then she laughed.

"You must have been hitting it up strong to-day, Wilson," she said.

"Oh, no, I haven't; but it's funny I never thought of it before. Allen told me a long while ago that a fellow by the name of Evans was handling the hootch for him. He said he got a job from the Penningtons as stable man in order to be near the camp where they had the stuff cached in the hills. He described Evans as a young blood, so I guess there isn't any doubt about it. You have a brother—I've heard you speak of him."

"I don't believe you," she said.

"It don't make any difference whether you believe me or not. I could put your brother in the pen, and they've only got Pennington in the county jail. All they could get on him, according to this article, was having stolen goods in his possession; but your brother was in on the whole proposition. It was hidden in his hay barn. He delivered it to a fellow who came up there every week, ostensibly to get hay, and your brother collected the money. Gosh, they'd send him up for sure if I ever tipped them off to what I know!"

And thus was fashioned the power he used to force her to his will.

A week later the bungalow on Circle Terrace was engaged, and Grace Evans took up the work of peddling narcotics, which Shannon Burke had laid down a few months before. With this difference—Gaza de Lure had shared in the profits of the traffic, while Grace Evans got nothing more than her living, and what drugs she craved for her personal use.

Her life, her surroundings, every environment of this new and terrible world into which her ambition had introduced her, tended rapidly to ravish her beauty. She faded with a rapidity that was surprising even to Crumb—surprising and annoying. He had wanted her for her beauty, and now she was losing it; but still he must keep her, because of her value in his nefarious commerce.

As weeks and months went by, he no longer took pleasure in her society, and was seldom at the bungalow save when he came to demand an accounting and to collect the proceeds of her sales. Her pleas and reproaches had no other effect upon him than

to arouse his anger. One day, when she clung to him, begging him not to desert her, he pushed her roughly from him so that she fell, and in falling she struck the edge of a table and hurt herself.

This happened in April. On the following day Custer Pennington, his term in the county jail expired, was liberated.

XXVIII

CUSTER'S long hours of loneliness had often been occupied with plans against the day of his liberation. That Grace had not seen him or communicated with him since his arrest and conviction had been a source of wonder and hurt to him. He recalled many times the circumstance of the telephone call, with a growing belief that Grace had been there, but had refused to talk with him. Nevertheless, he was determined to see her before he returned to Ganado.

He had asked particularly that none of his family should come to Los Angeles on the day of his release, but that the roadster should be sent up on the preceding day and left in a garage for him. He lost no time, after quitting the jail, in getting his machine and driving out to Hollywood, to the house where Grace had boarded.

The woman who answered his ring told him that Grace no longer lived there. At first she was loath to give him any information as to the girl's whereabouts; but after some persuasion she gave him a number on Circle Terrace, and in that direction Pennington turned his car.

As he left his car before the bungalow, and approached the building, he could see into the interior through the screen door, for it was a warm day in April, and the inner door was open. As he mounted the few steps leading to the porch, he saw a woman cross the living room, into which the door opened. She moved hurriedly, disappearing through a doorway opposite and closing the door after her. Though he had but a brief glimpse of her in the darkened interior, he knew that it was Grace, so familiar were every line of her figure and every movement of her carriage.

It was several minutes after Custer rang before a Japanese appeared at the doorway. It was the same Japanese "schoolboy" who had served as general factotum at the Vista del Paso bungalow. He opened the screen door a few inches and looked inquiringly at the caller.

"I wish to see Miss Evans," said Custer.

He took a card case from his pocket and handed a card to the servant, who looked blankly at the card and then at the caller, finally shaking his head stupidly and closing the door.

"No here," he said. "Nobody home."

Pennington recalled once more the affair of the telephone. He knew that he had just seen Grace inside the bungalow. He had come to talk with her, and he intended to do so.

He laid his hand on the handle of the door and jerked it open. The Jap, evidently lacking in discretion, endeavored to prevent him from entering. First the guardian clawed at the door in an effort to close it, and then, very foolishly, he attempted to push Pennington out on to the porch. The results were disastrous to the Jap.

Crossing the living room, Custer rapped on the door through which he had seen Grace go, calling her by name. Receiving no reply, he flung the door open. Facing him was the girl he was engaged to marry.

With her back against the dresser, Grace stood at the opposite end of the room. Her disheveled hair fell about her face, which was overspread with a sickly pallor. Her wild, staring eyes were fixed upon him. Her mouth, drooping at the corners, tremulously depicted a combination of terror and anger.

"Grace!" he exclaimed.

She still stood staring at him for a moment before she spoke.

"What do you mean," she demanded at last, "by breaking into my bedroom? Get out! I don't want to see you. I don't want you here!"

He crossed the room and put a hand upon her shoulder.

"My God, Grace," he cried, "what is the matter? What has happened to you?"

"Nothing has happened," she mumbled. "There is nothing the matter with me. I suppose you want me to go back with the rest of the rubes. I am through with the damned country—and country jakes, too!" she added.

"You mean that you don't want me here, Grace? That you don't love me?" he asked.

"Love you?" She broke into a disagreeable laugh. "Why, you poor rube, I never want to see you again!"

He stood looking at her for a moment longer, and then he turned slowly and walked out of the bungalow and down to

his car. When he had gone, the girl threw herself face down upon the bed and burst into uncontrollable sobs. For the moment she had risen triumphant above the clutches of her sordid vice. For that brief moment she had played her part to save the man she loved from greater torture and humiliation in the future—at what a price only she could ever know.

Custer found them waiting for him on the east porch as he drove up to the ranch house. The new freedom and the long drive over the beautiful highway through the clear April sunshine, with the green hills at his left and the lovely valley spread out upon his right hand to some extent alleviated the depression that had followed the shock of his interview with Grace; and when he alighted from the car he seemed quite his normal self.

Eva was the first to reach him. She fairly threw herself upon her brother, laughing and crying in a hysteria of happiness. His mother was smiling through her tears, while the colonel blew his nose violently, remarking that it was "a hell of a time of year to have a damned cold!"

Custer joked a little about his imprisonment, but he soon saw that the mere mention of it had a most depressing effect upon Eva; so he did not revert to the subject again in her presence. He confined himself to plying them with a hundred questions about happenings on the ranch during his long absence, the condition of the stock, and the crop outlook for the season.

As he considered the effect his undeserved jail sentence had produced upon the sensibilities of his sister, he was doubly repaid for the long months of confinement that he had suffered in order to save her from the still greater blow of having the man she was to marry justly convicted of a far more serious crime. He saw no reason now why she should ever learn the truth. The temporary disgrace of his incarceration would soon be forgotten in the everyday run of work and pleasure that constituted the life of Ganado, and the specter of her hurt pride would no longer haunt her.

Custer was surprised that Guy and Mrs. Evans had not been of the party that welcomed his return. When he mentioned this, Eva told him that Mrs. Evans thought the Penningtons would want to have him all to themselves for a while, and that their neighbors were coming up after dinner. And it was not until dinner that he asked after Shannon.

"We have seen very little of her since you left," explained his mother. "She returned Baldy soon after that, and bought the Senator from Mrs. Evans."

"I don't know what is the matter with the child," said the colonel. "She is as sweet as ever when we do see her, and she always asks after you and tells us that she believes in your innocence. She rides a great deal at night, but seldom, if ever, in the daytime. I don't think it is safe for a woman to ride alone in the hills at night, and I have told her so; but she says that she is not afraid, and that she loves the hills as well by night as by day."

"Eva has missed her company very much," said Mrs. Pennington. "I was afraid that we might have done something to offend her, but none of us could think what it could have been."

"I thought she was ashamed of us," said Eva.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed the colonel.

"Of course that's nonsense," said Custer. "She knows as well as the rest of you that I was innocent."

He was thinking how much more surely Shannon knew his innocence than any of them.

During dinner Eva regained her old-time spirit. More than once the tears came to Mrs. Pennington's eyes as she realized that once more their little family was united, and that the pall of sorrow that had weighed so heavily upon them for the past six months had at last lifted, revealing again the sunshine of the daughter's heart, which had never been the same since their boy had gone away.

"Oh, Cus!" exclaimed Eva. "The most scrumptious thing is going to happen, and I'm so glad that you are going to be here too. It's going to be perfectly gorgeristic! There'll be a whole regiment of them, and they're going to be camped right up at the mouth of Jackknife. I can scarcely wait until they come—can you?"

"I think I might manage," said her brother; "at least until you tell me what you are talking about."

"Pictures," exclaimed Eva. "Isn't it simplimetic gorgeristic? And they may be here a whole month!"

"What in the world is the child talking about?" asked Custer, appealing to his mother.

"Your father—" Mrs. Pennington started to explain.

"Oh, don't tell him!" cried Eva. "I want to tell him myself."

"You have been explaining for several minutes," said Custer; "but you haven't said anything yet."

"Well, I'll start at the beginning, then. They're going to have Indians, and cowboys, and—"

"That sounds more like the finish," suggested Custer.

"Don't interrupt me! They're going to take a picture on Ganado."

Custer turned toward his father with a look of surprise.

"You needn't blame papa," said Eva. "It was all my fault—or, rather, I should say our good fortune is all due to me. You see, papa wasn't going to let them come at first, but the cutest man came up to see him—a nice, short, fat little man, and he rubbed his hands together and said: 'Vell, colonel?' Papa told him that he had never allowed any picture companies on the place; but I happened to be there, and that was all that saved us, for I teased and teased and teased until finally papa said that they could come, provided they didn't take any pictures up around the house. They didn't want to do that, for they're making a Western picture, and they said the scenery at the back of the ranch is just what they want. They're coming up in a few days, and it's going to be perfectly radiant, and maybe I'll get in the pictures!"

"If I thought so," said Custer, "I'd put a can of nitroglycerine under the whole works the moment they drove on to the property!" He was thinking of what the pictures had done for Grace Evans. "I am surprised that you permitted it, father," he said, turning to the colonel.

"I'm rather surprised myself," admitted the older Pennington; "but what was I to do, with that suave little location manager rubbing his hands and oiling me on one side, and this little rascal here pestering the life out of me on the other? I simply had to give in. I don't imagine any harm will come from it. They've promised to be very careful of all the property, and whenever any of our stock is used it will be handled by our own men."

"I suppose they are going to pay you handsomely for it," suggested Custer.

The colonel smiled.

"Well, that wasn't exactly mentioned," he said; "but I have a recollection that the location manager said something about presenting us with a fine set of stills of the ranch."

"Generous of them!" said Custer. "They'll camp all over the shop, use our water, burn our firewood, and trample up our pasture, and in return they'll give us a set of photographs. Their liberality is truly marvelous!"

"Well, to tell you the truth," said the colonel, "after I found how anxious Eva was, I wouldn't have dared mention payment, for fear they might refuse to come and this young lady's life might be ruined in consequence!"

"What outfit is it?" asked the son.

"It's a company from the K. K. S., directed by a man by the name of Crumb."

"Wilson Crumb, the famous actor-director," added Eva. "How perfectly radiant! I danced with him in Los Angeles a year ago."

"Oh, that's the fellow, is it?" said Custer. "I have a hazy recollection that you were mad about him for some fifteen minutes after you reached home, but I have never heard you mention him since."

"Well, to tell you the truth," said Eva, "I had forgotten all about him until that perfectly gorgeous little loquacious manager mentioned him."

"Location manager," corrected her father.

"He was both."

"Yes, he was," said the colonel. "I rather hope he comes back. I haven't enjoyed any one so much since the days of Weber and Fields."

It was after eight o'clock when the Evanses arrived. Mrs. Evans was genuinely affected at seeing Custer again, for she was as fond of him as if he had been her own son. In Guy, Custer discovered a great change. The boy that he had left had become suddenly a man, quiet and reserved, with a shadow of sadness in his expression. His lesson had been a hard one, Custer knew, and the price that he had had to pay for it had left its indelible mark upon his sensitive character.

Guy's happiness at having Custer back again was overshadowed to some extent by the shame that he must always feel when he looked into the face of the man who had shouldered his guilt and taken the punishment which should have been his. The true purpose of Pennington's sacrifice could

never alter young Evans's realization of the fact that the part he had been forced to take had been that of a coward, a traitor, and a cad.

The first greetings over, Mrs. Evans asked Custer if he had seen Grace before he left Los Angeles.

"I saw her," he said, "and she is not at all well. I think Guy should go up there immediately, and try to bring her back. I meant to speak to him about it this evening."

"She is not seriously ill?" exclaimed Mrs. Evans.

"I cannot say," replied Custer. "I doubt if she is seriously ill in a physical sense, but she is not well. I could see that. She has changed a great deal. I think you should lose no time, Guy," he added, turning to Grace's brother, "in going to Los Angeles and getting her. She has been gone almost a year. It is time she knew whether her dreams are to come true or not. From what I saw of her, I doubt if they have materialized."

"I will go to-morrow," said young Evans.

XXIX

THE six months that had just passed had been months of indecision and sadness for Shannon Burke. Constantly moved by a conviction that she should leave the vicinity of Ganado and the Penningtons, she was held there by a force that she had not the power to overcome.

Never before since she had left her mother's home in the Middle West had she experienced the peace and content and happiness that her little orchard on the highway imparted to her life. The friendship of the Penningtons had meant more to her than anything that had hitherto entered her life; and to be near them, even if she saw them but seldom, constituted a constant bulwark against the assaults of her old enemy, which still occasionally assailed the ramparts of her will.

After the departure of Custer she had conscientiously observed what she considered to be his wishes as expressed in his reference comparing her with the girl friend of Cousin William, whom he had practically ordered out of the house. She had as far as possible avoided Eva's society; and though contemplation of the cause of this avoidance filled her with humiliation, and with a sense of the injustice of all that it implied, she nevertheless felt it a duty to the man she loved to respect his every wish, however indirectly suggested.

That she might put herself in Eva's way as seldom as possible, Shannon had formed the habit of riding at those hours at which the Penningtons were not accustomed to ride. The habit of solitude grew upon her, and she loved the loneliness of the hills. They never oppressed her—she never feared them. They drew her to them and soothed her as a mother might have done. There she forgot her sorrows, and hope was stimulated to new life.

Especially when the old craving seized her did she long for the hills, and it was because of this that she first rode at night—on a night of brilliant moonlight that imparted to familiar scenes the weird beauties of a strange world. The experience was unique. It assumed the proportions of an adventure, and it lured her to other similar excursions.

Even the Senator felt the spell of enchantment. He stepped daintily with upricked ears and arched neck, peering nervously into the depth of each shadowy bush. He leaped suddenly aside at the movement of a leaf, or halted, trembling and snorting, at the moon-bathed outlines of some jutting rock that he had passed a hundred times, unmoved, by day.

The moonlight rides led Shannon to others on moonless nights, so that she was often in the saddle when the valley slept. She invariably followed the same trail on these occasions, with the result that both she and the Senator knew every foot of it so well that they had traversed it beneath the blackness of heavy clouds, or when low fogs obliterated all but the nearest objects.

Never, in the hills, could her mind dwell upon depressing thoughts. Only cheerful reflections were her companions of those hours of solitude. She thought of the love that had come into her life, of the beauty of it, and of all that it had done to make life more worth the living; of the Penningtons and the example of red-blooded cleanliness that they set—decency without prudery; of her little orchard and the saving problems it had brought to occupy her mind and hands; of her horse and her horsemanship, two never-failing sources of companionship and pleasure which the Penningtons had taught her to love and enjoy.

On the morning after Custer's return, Guy started early for Los Angeles, while

Custer—Shannon not having joined them on their morning ride — resaddled the Apache after breakfast and rode down to her bungalow. He both longed to see her and dreaded the meeting; for, regardless of Grace's attitude and of the repulse she had given him, his honor bound him to her. Loyalty to the girl had been engendered by long years of association, during which friendship had grown into love by so gradual a process that it seemed to each of them that there had never been a time when they had not loved. Such attachments, formed in the heart of youth, hallowed by time, and fortified by the pride and honor of inherited chivalry, become a part of the characters of their possessors, and as difficult to uproot as those other habits of thought and action which differentiate one individual from another.

Custer had realized, in that brief interview of the day before, that Grace was not herself. What was the cause of her change he could not guess, since he was entirely unacquainted with the symptoms of narcotics. Even had a suspicion of the truth entered his mind, he would have discarded it as a vile slander upon the girl, as he had rejected the involuntary suggestion that she might have been drinking. His position was distressing for a man to whom honor was a fetish, since he knew that he still loved Grace, while at the same time realizing a still greater love for Shannon.

She saw him coming and came down the driveway to meet him, her face radiant with the joy of his return, and with that expression of love that is always patent to all but the object of its concern.

"Oh, Custer!" she cried. "I am so glad that you are home again! It has seemed years and years, rather than months, to all of us."

"I am glad to be home, Shannon. I have missed you, too. I have missed you all—everything—the hills, the valley, every horse and cow and little pig, the clean air, the smell of flowers and sage—all that is Ganado."

"You like it better than the city?"

"I shall never long for the city again," he said. "Cities are wonderful, of course, with their great buildings, their parks and boulevards, their fine residences, their lawns and gardens. The things that men have accomplished there fill a fellow with admiration; but how pitiful they really are compared with the magnificence that is ours!" He turned and pointed toward the mountains. "Just think of those hills, Shannon, and the infinite, unthinkable power that uplifted such mighty monuments. Think of the countless ages that they have endured, and then compare them with the puny efforts of man. Compare the range of vision of the city dweller with ours. He can see across the street, and to the top of some tall building, which may look imposing; but place it beside one of our hills, and see what becomes of it. Place it in a ravine in the high Sierras, and you would have difficulty in finding it; and you cannot even think of it in connection with a mountain fifteen or twenty thousand feet in height. And yet the city man patronizes us country people, deploring the necessity that compels us to pursue our circumscribed existence."

"Pity him," laughed Shannon. "He is as narrow as his streets. His ideals can reach no higher than the pall of smoke that hangs over the roofs of his buildings. I am so glad, Custer, that you have given up the idea of leaving the country for the city!"

"I never really intended to," he replied. "I couldn't have left, on father's account; but now I can remain on my own as well as his, and with a greater degree of contentment. You see that my recent experience was a blessing in disguise."

"I am glad if some good came out of it; but it was a wicked injustice, and there were others as innocent as you who suffered fully as much—Eva especially."

"I know," he said. "She has been very lonely since I left, with Grace away, too; and they tell me that you have constantly avoided them. Why?"

He had dismounted and tied the Apache, and they were walking toward the porch. She stopped, and turned to look Custer squarely in the eyes.

"How could I have done otherwise?" she asked.

"I do not understand," he replied.

She could not hold her eyes to his as she explained, but looked down, her expression changing from happiness to one of shame and sadness.

"You forget that girl, the friend of Cousin William?" she asked.

"Oh, Shannon!" he cried, laying a hand impulsively upon her arm. "I told you that I wouldn't say that to you. I didn't want you to stay away. I have implicit confidence in you."

"No," she contradicted him. "In your heart you thought it, and perhaps you were right."

"No," he insisted. "Please don't stay away—promise me that you will not! You have hurt them all, and they are all so fond of you!"

"I am sorry, Custer. I would not hurt them. I love them all; but I thought I was doing the thing that you wished. There was so much that you did not understand—that you can never understand—and you were away where you couldn't know what was going on; so it seemed disloyal to do the thing I thought you would rather I didn't do."

"It's all over now," he said. "Let's start over again, forgetting all that has happened in the last six months and a half."

Again, as his hand lay upon her arm, he was seized with an almost uncontrollable desire to crush her to him. Two things deterred him—his loyalty to Grace, and the belief that his love would be unwelcome to Shannon.

XXX

GUY EVANS swept over the broad, smooth highway at a rate that would have won him ten days in the jail at Santa Ana had his course led him through that village. The impression that Custer's words had implanted in his mind was that Grace was ill, for Pennington had not gone into the details of his unhappy interview with the girl, choosing to leave to her brother a realization of her changed condition, which would have been incredible to him even from the lips of so trusted a friend as Custer.

And so it was that when he approached the bungalow on Circle Terrace, and saw a coupé standing at the curb, he guessed at what it portended; for though there were doubtless hundreds of similar cars in the city, there was that about this one which suggested the profession of its owner. As Guy hurried up the walk to the front door, he was as positive that he would find Grace ill, and a doctor in attendance, as if some one had already told him so.

There was no response to his ring, and as the inner door was open he entered. A door on the opposite side of the living room was ajar. As Guy approached it, a man appeared in the doorway, and beyond him the visitor could see Grace lying, very white and still, upon a bed.

"Who are you—this woman's husband?" demanded the man in curt tones.

"I am her brother. What is the matter? Is she very ill?"

"Did you know of her condition?"

"I heard last night that she was not well, and I hurried up here. I live in the country. Who are you? What has happened? She is not—my God, she is not—"

"Not yet. Perhaps we can save her. I am a doctor. I was called by a Japanese, who said that he was a servant here. He must have left after he called me, for I have not seen him. Her condition is serious, and requires an immediate operation—an operation of such a nature that I must learn the name of her own physician, and have him present. Where is her husband?"

"Husband! My sister is not—" Guy ceased speaking, and went suddenly white. "My God, doctor, you don't mean that she—that my sister—oh, no, not that!"

He seized the other's arm beseechingly. The doctor laid his hand upon the younger man's shoulder.

"She had a fall night before last, and an immediate operation is imperative. Her condition is such that we cannot even take the risk of moving her to a hospital. I have my instruments in my car, but I should have help. Who is her doctor?"

"I do not know."

"I'll get some one. I have given her something to quiet her."

The doctor stepped to the telephone and gave a number. Evans entered the room where his sister lay. She was moving about restlessly and moaning, though it was evident that she was still unconscious.

Changed! Guy wondered that he had known her at all, now that he was closer to her. Her face was pinched and drawn. Her beauty was gone—every vestige of it. She looked old and tired and haggard, and there were terrible lines upon her face that stilled her brother's heart and brought the tears to his eyes.

He heard the doctor summoning an assistant and directing him to bring ether. Then he heard him go out of the house by the front door—to get his instruments, doubtless. The brother knelt by the girl's bed.

"Grace!" he whispered, and threw an arm about her.

Her lids fluttered, and she opened her eyes.

"Guy!"

She recognized him—she was conscious.

"Who did this?" he demanded. "What is his name?"

She shook her head.

"What is the use?" she asked. "It is done."

"Tell me!"

"You would kill him—and be punished. It would only make it worse—for—you—and mother. Let it die with me!"

"You are not going to die. Tell me, who is he? Do you love him?"

"I hate him!"

"How were you injured?"

"He threw me—against—a table."

Her voice was growing weaker. Choking back tears of grief and anger, the young man rose and stood beside her.

"Grace, I command you to tell me!"

His voice was low, but it was vibrant with power and authority. The girl tried to speak. Her lips moved, but she uttered no sound. Guy thought that she was dying, and taking her secret to the grave.

Her eyes moved to something beyond the foot of the bed, back to his, and back again to whatever she had been looking at, as if she sought to direct his attention to something in that part of the room. He followed the direction of her gaze. There was a dressing table there, and on it a photograph of a man in a silver frame. Guy stepped to the table and picked up the picture.

"This is he?"

His eyes demanded an answer. Her lips moved soundlessly, and weakly she nodded an affirmative.

"What is his name?"

She was too weak to answer him. She gasped, and her breath came flutteringly. The brother threw himself upon his knees beside the bed, and took her in his arms. His tears mingled with his kisses on her cheek. The doctor came then and drew him away.

"She is dead!" said the boy, turning away and covering his face with his hands.

"No," said the doctor, after a brief examination. "She is not dead. Get into the kitchen, and get some water to boiling. I'll be getting things ready in here. Another doctor will be here in a few minutes."

Glad of something to do, just to help, Guy hastened into the little kitchen. He found a kettle and a large pan, and put water in them to boil.

A moment later the doctor came in. He had removed his coat and vest and rolled up his sleeves. He placed his instruments in the pan of water on the stove, and then he went to the sink and washed his hands. While he scrubbed, he talked. He was an efficient-looking, businesslike person, and he inspired Guy with confidence and hope.

"She has a fighting chance," he said. "I've seen worse cases pull through. She's had a bad time, though. She must have been lying here for pretty close to twenty-four hours without any attention. I found her fully dressed on her bed—fully dressed except for what clothes she'd torn off in her pain. If some one had called a doctor yesterday at this time, it might have been all right. It may be all right even now. We'll do the best we can."

The bell rang.

"That's the doctor. Let him in, please."

Guy went to the door and admitted the second physician, who removed his coat and vest and went directly to the kitchen. The first doctor was entering the room where Grace lay. He turned and spoke to his colleague, greeting him; then he disappeared within the adjoining room. The second doctor busied himself about the sink, sterilizing his hands. Guy lighted another burner and put on another vessel with water in it.

A moment later the first doctor returned to the kitchen.

"It will not be necessary to operate, doctor," he said. "We were too late!"

His tone and manner were still very businesslike and efficient, but there was an expression of compassion in his eyes as he crossed the room and put his arm about Guy's shoulders.

"Come into the other room, my boy. I want to talk to you," he said.

Guy, dry-eyed, and walking almost as one in a trance, accompanied him to the little living room.

"You have had a hard blow," said the doctor. "What I am going to tell you may make it harder; but if she had been my sister I should have wanted to know about it. She is better off. The chances are that she didn't want to live. She certainly made no fight for life—not since I was called."

"Why should she want to die?" Guy asked dully. "We would have forgiven her. No one would ever have known about it but me."

"There was something else—she was a drug addict. That was probably the reason

why she didn't want to live. The morphine I had to give her to quiet her would have killed three ordinary men."

And so Guy Evans came to know the terrible fate that had robbed his sister of her dreams, of her ambition, and finally of her life. He placed the full responsibility upon the man whose picture had stood in its silver frame upon the girl's dressing table. As he knelt beside the dead girl, he swore to search until he had learned the identity of that man, and found him, and forced from him the only expiation that could satisfy the honor of a brother.

XXXI

THE death of Grace had, of course, its naturally depressing effect upon the circle of relatives and friends at Ganado; but her absence of more than a year, the infrequency of her letters, and the fact that they had already come to feel that she was lost to them, mitigated to some degree the keenness of their grief and lessened its outward manifestations. Her pitiful end could not seriously interrupt the tenor of their lives, which had long since grown over the wound of her departure, as a tree's growth rolls over the hurt of a severed limb, leaving only a scar as a reminder of its loss.

Mrs. Evans, Guy, and Custer suffered more than the others—Mrs. Evans because of the natural instincts of motherhood, and Custer from a sense of loss that seemed to have uprooted and torn away a part of his being, even though he realized that his love for Grace had been of a different sort from his hopeless passion for Shannon Burke. It was Guy who suffered most, for hugged to his breast was the gnawing secret of the truth of his sister's life and death. He had told them that Grace had died of pneumonia, and they had not gone behind his assertion to search the records for the truth.

Locked in his desk was the silver frame and the picture of the man whose identity he had been unable to discover. The bungalow had been leased in Grace's name. The Japanese servant had disappeared, and Guy had been unable to obtain any trace of him. The dead girl had had no friends in the neighborhood, and there was no one who could tell him anything that might lead to the discovery of the man he sought.

He did not, however, give up his search. He went often to Hollywood, where he haunted public places and the entrances to studios, in the hope that some day he would find the man he sought; but as the passing months brought no success, and the duties of his ranch and his literary work demanded more and more of his time, he was gradually compelled to push the furtherance of his vengeance into the background, though without any lessening of his determination to compass it eventually.

To Custer, the direct effect of Grace's death was to revive the habit of drinking more than was good for him—a habit from which he had drifted away during the past year. That it had ever been a habit he would, of course, have been the last to admit. He was one of those men who could drink, or leave it alone. The world is full of them, and so are the cemeteries.

Custer avoided Shannon when he could do so without seeming unfriendly. Quite unreasonably, he felt that his love for Shannon was an indication of disloyalty to Grace. The latter's dismissal of him he had never taken as a serious avowal of her heart. He had realized that the woman who had spoken so bitterly had not been the girl he had loved, and whose avowals of love he had listened to. Nor had she been the girl upon whose sad, tired face he had looked for the last time in the darkened living room of the Evans home, for then death had softened the hard lines of dissipation, revealing again, in chastened melancholy, the soul that sin had disguised but not destroyed.

Shannon recognized the change in Custer. She attributed it to his grief, and to his increased drinking, which she had sensed almost immediately, as love does sense the slightest change in its object, however little apparent to another. She did not realize that he was purposely avoiding her. She was more than ever with Eva now, for Guy, having settled down to the serious occupations of man's estate, no longer had so much leisure to devote to play.

She still occasionally rode at night, for the daytime rides with Custer were less frequent now. Much of his time was occupied closer in around the ranch, with the conditioning of the show herds for the coming fall—an activity which gave him a plausible excuse for foregoing his rides with Shannon. The previous year they had been compelled to cancel their entries because of Custer's imprisonment, since the colonel would not make the circuit of the shows himself, and did not care to trust the herds to any one but his son. Now the

Morgans, the Percherons, the Herefords, and the Berkshires that were to uphold the fame of Ganado were the center of arduous and painstaking fitting and grooming, as the time approached when the finishing touches were to be put upon glossy coat and polished horn and hoof.

May, June, and July had come and gone —it was August again. Guy's futile visits to Los Angeles were now infrequent. The life of Ganado had again assumed the cheerfulness of the past. The heat of summer had brought the swimming pool into renewed demand, and the cool evenings saved the ballroom from desertion. The youth of the foothills and valley, reënforced by week-end visitors from the city, filled the old house with laughter and happiness. Shannon was always of these parties, for they would not let her remain away.

It was upon the occasion of one of them, early in August, that Eva announced the date of her wedding.

"The 2nd of September," she told them. "It comes on a Saturday. We're going to motor to—"

"Hold on!" cautioned Guy. "That's a secret!"

"And when we come back we're going to start building on Hill Thirteen."

"That's a cow pasture," said Custer.

"Well, it won't be one any more. You must find another cow pasture."

"Certainly, little one," replied her brother. "We'll bring the cows up here in the ballroom. With five thousand acres to pick from, you can't find a bungalow site anywhere except in the best dairy cow pasture on Ganado!"

"With five thousand acres to pick from, I suppose you can't find a cow pasture anywhere but on the best bungalow site in southern California! You radiant brother! You wouldn't have your little sister living in the hog pasture, now would you?"

"Heavens, no! Those nine children you aspire to would annoy the brood sows."

"You're hideous!"

"Put on a fox trot, some one," cried Guy. "Dance with your sister, Cus, and you'll let her build bungalows all over Ganado. No one can refuse her anything when they dance with her."

"I'll say they can't," agreed Custer. "Was that how she lured you to your undoing, Guy?"

"What a dapper little idea!" exclaimed Eva.

Guy danced that dance with Mrs. Pennington, and the colonel took out Shannon. As they moved over the smooth floor with the easy dignity that good dancers can impart to the fox trot, the girl's eyes were often on the brother and sister dancing and laughing together.

"How wonderful they are!" she said.

"Who?" inquired the colonel.

"Custer and Eva. Theirs is such a wonderful relationship between brother and sister—the way it ought to be, but very seldom is."

"Oh, I don't know that it's unique," replied the colonel. "Guy and Grace were that way, and so were my father's children. Possibly it's because we were all raised in the country, where children are more dependent upon their sisters and brothers for companionship than children of the city. We all get better acquainted in the country, and we have to learn to find the best that is in each of us, for we haven't the choice of companions here that a city, with its thousands, affords."

"I don't know," said Shannon. "Perhaps that is it; but anyway it is lovely—really *lovely*, for they are almost like two lovers. At first, when I heard them teasing each other, I used to think there might be some bitterness in their thrusts; but when I came to know you all better, I realized that your affection was so perfect that there could never be any misunderstanding among you."

"That attitude is not peculiar to the Penningtons," replied the colonel. "I know, for instance, of one who so perfectly harmonized with their lives and ideals that in less than a year she became practically one of them."

He was smiling down into Shannon's upturned face.

"I know—you mean me," she said. "It is awfully nice of you, and it makes me very proud to hear you say so, for I have really tried to be like you. If I have succeeded the least bit, I am so happy!"

"I don't know that you have succeeded in being like us," he laughed; "but you have certainly succeeded in being liked *by* us. Why, do you know, Shannon, I believe Mrs. Pennington and I discuss you and plan for you fully as much as we do the children. It is almost as if you were our other daughter."

The tears came to her eyes.

"I am so happy!" she said again.

It was later in the evening, after a dance, that she and Custer walked out on the driveway along the north side of the ballroom, and stood looking out over the moon-enchanted valley—a vista of loveliness glimpsed between masses of feathery foliage in an opening through the trees on the hillside just below them. They looked out across the acacias and cedars of the lower hill toward the lights of a little village twinkling between two domelike hills at the upper end of the valley. It was an unusually warm evening, almost too warm to dance.

"I think we'd get a little of the ocean breeze," said Custer, "if we were on the other side of the hill. Let's walk over to the water gardens. There is usually a breeze there, but the building cuts us off from it here."

Side by side, in silence, they walked around the front of the building and along the south drive to the steps leading down through the water gardens to the stables. The steps were narrow and Custer went ahead—which is always the custom of men in countries where there are rattlesnakes.

As Shannon stepped from the cement steps to the gravel walk above the first pool, her foot came down upon a round stone, turning her ankle and throwing her against Custer. For support she grasped his arm. Upon such insignificant trifles may the fate of lives depend. It might have been a lizard, a toad, a mouse, or even a rattlesnake that precipitated the moment which, for countless eons, creation had been preparing; but it was none of these. It was just a little round pebble—and it threw Shannon Burke against Custer Pennington, causing her to seize his arm. He felt the contact of those fingers, and the warmth of her body, and her cheek near his shoulder. He threw an arm about her to support her.

Almost instantly she had regained her footing. Laughingly she drew away.

"I stepped on a stone," she said in explanation; "but I didn't hurt my ankle."

But still he kept his arm about her. At first Shannon did not understand, and, supposing that he still thought her unable to stand alone, she again explained that she was unhurt.

He stood looking down into her face, which was turned up to his. The moon, almost full, revealed her features as clearly as sunlight—how beautiful they were, and how close. She had not yet fully realized the significance of his attitude when he suddenly threw his other arm about her and crushed her to him; and then, before she could prevent, he had bent his lips to hers and kissed her full upon the mouth.

With a startled cry she pushed him away.

"Custer!" she said. "What have you done? This is not like you. I do not understand!"

She was really terrified—terrified at the thought that he might have kissed her without love—terrified that he might have kissed her *with* love. She did not know which would be the greater catastrophe.

"I couldn't help it, Shannon," he said. "Blame the pebble, blame the moonlight, blame me—it won't make any difference. I couldn't help it; that is all there is to it. I've fought against it for months. I knew you didn't love me; but oh, Shannon, I love you!"

He loved her! He had loved her for months! Oh, the horror of it! Her little dream of happiness was shattered. No longer could they go on as they had. There would always be this between them—the knowledge of his love; and he would learn of her love for him, for she would not lie to him if he asked her. Then she would either have to explain or to go away—to explain those hideous months with Crumb. Custer would not believe the truth—no man would believe the truth—that she had come through them undefiled. She herself would not believe it of another woman, and she was too sophisticated to hope that the man who loved her would believe it of her.

He had not let her go. They still stood there—his arms about her.

"Please don't be angry, Shannon," he begged. "You may not want my love, but there's no disgrace in it. Maybe I shouldn't have kissed you, but I couldn't help it, and I'm glad I did. I have that to remember as long as I live. Please don't be angry!"

Angry! She wished to God that he would crush her to him again and kiss her—kiss her—kiss like that now and forever. Why shouldn't he? Why shouldn't she let him? What had she done to deserve eternal punishment? There were countless wives less virtuous than she. Ah, if she could but have the happiness of his love!

She closed her eyes and turned away her head, and for just an instant she dreamed her beautiful dream. Why not? Why not? Why not? There could be no better

wife than she, for there could be no greater love than hers.

He noticed that she no longer drew away. There had been no look of anger in her eyes —only startled questioning; and her face was still so near. Again his arms closed about her, and again his lips found hers.

This time she did not deny him. She was only human—only a woman—and her love, growing steadily in power for many months, had suddenly burst forth in a consuming fire beneath his burning kisses. He felt her lips move in a fluttering sob beneath his, and then her dear arms stole up about his neck and pressed him closer in complete surrender.

"Shannon! You love me?"

"Ah, dear boy, always!"

He drew her to the lower end of a pool, where a rustic seat stood half concealed by the foliage of a drooping umbrella tree. There they sat and asked each other the same questions that lovers have asked since prehistoric man first invented speech, and that lovers will continue to ask so long as speech exists upon earth; very important questions—by far the most important questions in the world.

They did not know how long they had sat there—to them it seemed but a moment —when they heard voices calling their names from above.

"Shannon! Custer! Where are you?"

"I suppose we'll have to go," he said. "Just one more kiss!"

He took a dozen; and then they rose and walked up the steps to the south drive.

"Shall I tell them?" he asked.

"Not yet, please."

She was not sure that it would last. Such happiness was too sweet to endure.

Eva spied them.

"Where in the world have you two been?" she demanded. "We've been hunting all over for you, and shouting until I'm hoarse."

"We've been right down there by the upper pool, trying to cool off," replied Custer. "It's too beastly hot to dance."

"You never thought so before," said Eva suspiciously. "Do you know, I believe you two have been off spooning! How perfectly gorgeristic!"

"How perfectly nothing," replied Custer. "Old people, like Shannon and me, don't spoon. That's for you kids."

Eva came closer.

"Shannon, you'd better go and straighten your hair before any one else sees you." She laughed and pinched the other's arm. "I'd love it," she whispered in Shannon's ear, "if it were true! You'll tell me, won't you?"

"If it ever comes true, dear"—Shannon returned the whisper—"you shall be the first to know about it."

"Scrumptious! But say, I've got the divinest news—what do you think? Popsy has known it all day and never mentioned it—forgot all about it, he said, until just before he and mother trotted off to bed. Did you ever hear of anything so outrageous? And now half the folks have gone home, and I can't tell 'em. Oh, it's too spiffy for words! I've been longing and longing for it for months and months and months, and now it's going to happen—really going to happen—actually going to happen on Monday!"

"For Heaven's sake, little one, unwind, and get to the end of your harrowing story. What's going to happen?"

"Why, the K. K. S. company is coming on Monday, and Wilson Crumb is coming with them!"

Shannon staggered almost as from the force of a physical blow. Wilson Crumb coming! Coming to Ganado! Short indeed had been her sweet happiness!

"What's the matter, Shannon?" asked Custer solicitously.

The girl steadied herself quickly.

"Oh, it's nothing," she said, with a nervous laugh. "I just felt a little dizzy for a moment."

"You had better go in the house and lie down," he suggested.

"No, I think I'll go home, if you'll drive me down, Custer. You know ten o'clock is pretty late for us."

"It's Saturday night," said Eva.

"But I don't want to miss my ride in the morning. You're all going, aren't you?"

"I am," said Custer.

He noticed that she was very quiet as they drove down to her place, and when they parted she clung to him as if she could not bear to let him go.

It was very wonderful—the miracle of this great love. As he drove back home, he could not think of anything else. He was not egotistical, and it seemed strange that from all the men she must have known Shannon had kept her love for him. With Grace it had been different. Their love had grown up with them from childhood.

It had seemed no more remarkable that Grace should love him than that Eva should love him, or that he should love Grace; but Shannon had come to him out of a strange world—a world full of men—where, with her beauty and her charm, she must have been an object of admiration to many. Yet she had brought her heart to him intact; for she had told him that she had never loved another—and she had told him the truth.

XXXII

After Custer left her, Shannon entered the bungalow and sat for a long time before the table on which stood a framed photograph of her mother. Never before had she felt the need of loving counsel so sorely as now. In almost any other emergency she could have gone to Mrs. Pennington, but in this she dared not. She knew the pride of the Penningtons. She realized the high altar upon which they placed the purity of their women in the sacred temple of their love, and she knew that none but the pure might enter.

In her heart of hearts she knew that she had the right to stand there beside his mother or his sister; but the pity of it was that she could never prove that right, for who would believe her? Men had been hanged upon circumstantial evidence less damning than that which might be arrayed against her purity. No—if ever they should learn of her association with Wilson Crumb, they would cast her out of their lives as they would put a leper out of their home.

Not even Custer's love could survive such a blow to his honor and his pride. She did not think the less of him because of that, for she was wise enough in the ways of the world to know that pride and virtue are oftentimes uncompromising, even to narrowness.

Her only hope, therefore, lay in avoiding discovery by Wilson Crumb during his stay at Ganado. Her love, and the weakness it had induced, permitted her to accept the happiness from which an unkind fate had hitherto debarred her, and to which even now her honor told her she had no right.

She wished that Custer had not loved her, and that she might have continued to live the life that she had learned to love, where she might be near him, and might constantly see him in the happy consociation of friendship; but with his arms about her and his kisses on her lips she had not had the strength to deny him, or to dissimulate the great love which had ordered her very existence for many months.

In the brief moments of bliss that had followed the avowal of his love, she had permitted herself to drift without thought of the future; but now that the sudden knowledge of the approaching arrival of Crumb had startled her into recollection of the past and consideration of its bearings upon the future, she realized only too poignantly that the demands of honor required that sooner or later she herself must tell Custer the whole sordid story of those hideous months in Hollywood. There was no other way. She could not mate with a man unless she could match her honor with his. There was no alternative other than to go away forever.

It was midnight before she arose and went to her room. She went deliberately to a drawer which she kept locked, and, finding the key, she opened it. From it she took the little black case, and, turning back the cover, she revealed the phials, the needles, and the tiny syringe that had played so sinister a part in her past.

What she was doing to-night she had done so often in the past year that it had almost assumed the proportions of a rite. It had been her wont to parade her tempters before her, that she might have the satisfaction of deriding them, and of proving the strength of the new will that her love for Custer Pennington had been so potent a factor in developing. To-night she went a little further. She took a bit of cotton, and, placing it in the bowl of a spoon, she dissolved some of the white powder with the aid of a lighted match held beneath the spoon, and then she drew the liquid into the syringe.

Her nerves were overwrought and unstrung from the stress of the conflicting emotions they had endured that evening, and the risk she took was greater than she guessed. And yet, as she looked at the syringe, and realized that its contents held surcease of sorrow, that it held quiet and rest and peace, she felt only repugnance toward it. Not even remotely did she consider the possibility of resorting again to the false happiness of morphine.

She knew now that she was freer from its temptations than one who had never used it; but she felt that after to-night, with the avowal of Pennington's love still in her

ears, she must no longer keep in her possession a thing so diametrically opposed to the cleanliness of his life and his character. For months she had retained it as a part of the system she had conceived for ridding herself of its power. Without it she might never have known whether she could withstand the temptation of its presence; but now she had finished with it. She needed it no longer.

With almost fanatical savagery she destroyed it, crushing the glass phials and the syringe beneath her heel and tearing the little case to shreds. Then, gathering up the fragments, she carried them to the fireplace in the living room and burned them.

On the following day the horses and several loads of properties from the K. K. S. studio arrived at Ganado, and the men who accompanied them pitched their camp well up in Jackknife Cañon. Eva was very much excited, and spent much of her time on horseback, watching their preparations. She tried to get Shannon to accompany her, but the latter found various excuses to remain away, being fearful that even though Crumb had not yet arrived, there might be other employees of the studio who would recognize her.

Crumb and the rest of the company came in the afternoon, although they had not been expected until the following day. Eva, who had made Custer ride up again with her in the afternoon, recalled to the actor-director the occasion upon which she had met him, and they had danced together, some year and a half before.

As soon as he met her, Crumb was struck by her beauty, youth, and freshness. He saw in her a possible means of relieving the tedium of his several weeks' enforced absence from Hollywood—though in the big brother he realized a possible obstacle, unless he were able to carry on his purposed gallantries clandestinely.

In the course of conversation he took occasion to remark that Eva ought to photograph well. "I'll let them take a hundred feet of you," he said, "some day when you're up here while we're working. We might discover an unsung Pickford up here among the hills!"

"She will remain unsung, then," said Custer curtly. "My sister has no desire to go into pictures."

"How do you know I haven't?" asked Eva.

"After Grace?" he asked significantly.

She turned to Crumb.

"I'm afraid I wouldn't make much of an actress," she said; "but it would be perfectly radiant to see myself in pictures just once!"

"Good!" he replied. "We'll get you all right some day that you're up here. I promise your brother that I won't try to persuade you into pictures."

"I hope not," said Custer.

As he and Eva rode back toward the house, he turned to the girl.

"I don't like that fellow Crumb," he said.

"Why?" she asked.

"It's hard to say. He just rubs me the wrong way; but I'd bet almost anything that he's a cad."

"Oh, I think he's perfectly divine!" said Eva.

Custer grunted.

"The trouble with you," announced Eva, "is that you're jealous of him because he's an actor. That's just like you men!"

Custer laughed.

"Maybe you're right," he said; "but I don't like him, and I hope you'll never go up there alone."

"Well, I'm going to see them take pictures," replied the girl; "and if I can't get any one to go with me, I'm going alone."

"I don't like the way he looked at you, Eva."

"You're perfectly silly! He didn't look at me any differently than any other man does."

"I don't know about that. I haven't the same keen desire to punch the head of every man I see looking at you as I had in his case."

"Oh, you're prejudiced! I'll bet anything he's just perfectly lovely!"

Next morning, finding no one with the leisure or inclination to ride with her, Eva rode up again to the camp. They had already commenced shooting. Although Crumb was busy, he courteously took the time to explain the scene on which they were working, and many of the technical details of picture making. He had a man hold her horse while she came and squinted through the finder. In fact, he spent so much time with her that he materially delayed the work of the morning. At the same time the infatuation that had had its birth on the preceding day grew to greater proportions in his diseased mind.

He asked her to stay and lunch with them. When she insisted that she must return home, he begged her to come again in the afternoon. Although she would have been glad to do so, for she found the work that they were doing novel and interesting, she declined his invitation, as she already had made arrangements for the afternoon.

He followed her to her horse, and walked beside her down the road a short distance from the others.

"If you can't come this afternoon," he said, "possibly you can come up this evening. We are going to take some night pictures. I hadn't intended inviting any one, because the work is going to be rather difficult and dangerous, and an audience might distract the attention of the actors; but if you think you could get away alone, I should be very glad to have you come up for a few minutes about nine o'clock. We shall be working in the same place. Don't forget," he repeated, as she started to ride away, "that for this particular scene I really ought not to have any audience at all; so if you come, please don't tell any one else about it."

"I'll come," she said. "It's awfully good of you to ask me, and I won't tell a soul."

Crumb smiled as he turned back to his waiting company.

Brought up in the atmosphere that had surrounded her since birth, unacquainted with any but honorable men, and believing as she did that all men are the chivalrous protectors of all women, Eva did not suspect the guile that lay behind the director's courteous manner and fair words. She looked upon the coming nocturnal visit to the scene of their work as nothing more than a harmless adventure; nor was there, from her experience, any cause for apprehension, since the company comprised some forty or fifty men and women who, like any one else, would protect her from any harm that lay in their power to avert.

Her conscience did not trouble her in the least, although she regretted that she could not share her good fortune with the other members of her family, and deplored the necessity of leaving the house surreptitiously, like a thief in the night. Such things did not appeal to Pennington standards; but Eva satisfied these qualms by promising herself that she would tell them all about it at breakfast the next morning.

After lunch that day Custer went to his room, and, throwing himself on his bed with a book, with the intention of reading for half an hour, fell asleep.

Shortly afterward Shannon Burke, feeling that there would be no danger of meeting any of the K. K. S. people at the Pennington house, rode up on the Senator to keep her appointment with Eva. As she tied her horse upon the north side of the house, Wilson Crumb stopped his car opposite the patio at the south drive. He had come up to see Colonel Pennington for the purpose of arranging for the use of a number of the Ganado Herefords in a scene on the following day.

Not finding Eva in the family sitting room, Shannon passed through the house and out into the patio, just as Wilson Crumb mounted the two steps to the arcade. Before either realized the presence of the other they were face to face, scarce a yard apart.

Shannon went deathly white as she recognized the man beneath his make-up, while Crumb stood speechless for a moment.

"My God, Gaza! You!" he presently managed to exclaim. "What are you doing here? Thank God I have found you at last!"

"Don't!" she begged. "Please don't speak to me. I am living a decent life here."

He laughed in a disagreeable manner.

"Decent!" he scoffed. "Where you getting the snow? Who's putting up for it?"

"I don't use it any more," she said.

"The hell you don't! You can't put that over on me! Some other guy is furnishing it. I know you — you can't get along two hours without it. I'm not going to stand for this. There isn't any guy going to steal my girl!"

"Hush, Wilson!" she cautioned. "For God's sake keep still! Some one might hear you."

"I don't give a damn who hears me. I'm here to tell the world that no one is going to take my girl away from me. I've found you, and you're going back with me, do you understand?"

She came very close to him, her eyes blazing.

"I'm not going back with you, Wilson Crumb," she said. "If you tell, or if you ever threaten me again in any way, I'll kill you. I managed to escape you, and I have found happiness at last, and no one shall take it away from me!"

"What about my happiness? You lived with me two years. I love you, and, by God, I'm going to have you, if I have to—"

A door slammed behind them, and they both turned to see Custer Pennington standing in the arcade outside his door, looking at them.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Did I interrupt?"

"This man is looking for some one, Custer," said Shannon, and turned to reënter the house.

Confronted by a man, Crumb's bravado had vanished. Intuitively he guessed that he was looking at the man who had stolen Gaza from him; but he was a very big young man, with broad shoulders and muscles that his flannel shirt and riding breeches did not conceal. Crumb decided that if he was going to have trouble with this man, it would be safer to commence hostilities at a time when the other was not looking.

"Yes," he said. "I was looking for your father, Mr. Pennington."

"Father is not here. He has driven over to the village. What do you want?"

"I wanted to see if I could arrange for the use of some of your Herefords to-morrow morning."

Pennington was leading the way toward Crumb's car.

"You can find out about that," he said, "or anything else that you may wish to know, from the assistant foreman, whom you will usually find up at the other end, around the cabin. If he is in doubt about anything, he will consult with us personally; so that it will not be necessary, Mr. Crumb, for you to go to the trouble of coming to the house again."

Custer's voice was level and low. It carried no suggestion of anger, yet there was that about it which convinced Crumb that he was fortunate in not having been kicked off the hill physically rather than verbally—for kicked off he had been, and advised to stay off, into the bargain.

He wondered how much Pennington had overheard of his conversation with Gaza. Shannon Burke, crouching in a big chair in the sitting room, was wondering the same thing.

As a matter of fact, Custer had overheard practically all of the conversation. The noise of Crumb's car had awakened him, but almost immediately he had fallen into a doze, through which the spoken words impinged upon his consciousness without any actual, immediate realization of their meaning, of the identity of the speakers. The moment that he became fully awake, and found that he was listening to a conversation not intended for his ears, he had risen and gone into the patio.

When finally he came into the sitting room, where Shannon was, he made no mention of the occurrence, except to say that the visitor had wanted to see his father. It did not seem possible to Shannon that he could have failed to overhear at least a part of their conversation, for they were standing not more than a couple of yards from the open window of his bedroom, and there was no other sound breaking the stillness of the August noon. She was sure that he had heard, and yet his manner indicated that he had not.

She waited a moment to see if he would be the first to broach the subject, but he did not. She determined to tell him then and there all that she had to tell, freeing her soul and her conscience of their burden, whatever the cost might be.

She rose and came to where he was standing, and, placing a hand upon his arm, looked up into his eyes.

"Custer," she said, "I have something to tell you. I ought to have told you before, but I have been afraid. Since last night there is no alternative but to tell you."

"You do not have to tell me anything that you do not want to tell me," he said. "My confidence in you is implicit. I could not both love and distrust at the same time."

"I must tell you," she said. "I only hope—"

"Where in the world have you been, Shannon?" cried Eva, breaking suddenly into the sitting room. "I have been away down to your place looking for you. I thought you were going to play golf with me this afternoon."

"That's what I came up for," said Shannon, turning toward her.

"Well, come on, then! We'll have to hurry, if we're going to play eighteen holes this afternoon."

Custer Pennington went to his room again after the girls had driven off in the direction of the Country Club. He wondered what it had been that Shannon wished to tell him. Round and round in his mind rang the words of Wilson Crumb:

"You lived with me two years — you lived with me two years—you lived with me two years!"

She had been going to explain that, he was sure; but she did not have to explain it. The girl that he loved could have done no wrong. He trusted her. He was sure of her.

But what place had that soft-faced cad had in her life? It was unthinkable that she had ever known him, much less that they had been upon intimate terms.

Custer went to his closet and rummaged around for a bottle. It had been more than two weeks since he had taken a drink. The return to his old intimacy with Shannon, and the frequency with which he now saw her had again weaned him from his habit; but to-day he felt the need of a drink—of a big drink, stiff and neat.

He swallowed the raw liquor as if it had been so much water. He wished now that he had punched Crumb's head when he had had the chance. The cur! He had spoken to Shannon as if she were a common woman of the streets—Shannon Burke—Custer's Shannon!

Feeling no reaction to the first drink, he took another.

"I'd like to get my fingers on his throat!" he thought. "Before I choked the life out of him, I'd drag him up here and make him kiss the ground at her feet!"

But no, he could not do that. Others would see it, and there would have to be explanations; and how could he explain it without casting reflections on Shannon?

For hours he sat there in his room, nursing his anger, his jealousy, and his grief; and all the time he drank and drank again. He went to his closet, got his belt and holster, and from his dresser drawer took a big, ugly-looking forty-five—a Colt's automatic. For a moment he stood holding it in his hand, looking at it. Almost caressingly he handled it, and then he slipped it into the holster at his hip, put on his hat, and started for the door.

(*To be concluded in the November number of* MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE)

ISLANDS

A LONELY island is each human soul,
Cut off by seas, misunderstanding seas,
From all the other lonely island souls,
And how each fares the others never know.

Upon each island shore the storms beat hard;
Corroding waters eat away its sands,
And wild winds waste among its lovely flowers.
Each island meets the storms as best it may,
And each to every tempest pays its toll,
Though what, the other islands never know!

Now and again upon an island shore
A signal beacon burns, but what it means
The other islands do not know or guess.
Is it perhaps a signal of distress,
Or is it meant to signify "All's well"?
The mists are thick, dividing seas are wide,
And all unread the signal beacon dies—
And leaves the other islands in the dark!

They strive sometimes to shout from shore to shore;
But it is hard to hear above the noise
Of pounding seas that roar so loud between—
The voices die away upon the winds!
A word comes now and then across the waste
Between; but most of what the islands shout
From shore across to shore is not the truth.
A lonely island is each human soul!

Roselle Mercier Montgomery